AMONG THE MUMMERS.

BY ALAN DALE

WHICH would you sooner be—a greater fool than you are, or a greater fool than you look? That seems to be the "problem" that the playwrights of to-day are attempting to solve. It is all very well to say that the problem play is dead, because audiences are tired of being asked to decide whether a lady divorced to the tune of seventeen co-respondents should be taken back to her husband's bank account again, or whether the society girl in her cups should be held responsible for her boozy confessions.

The problem play is still alive, and until somebody has successfully answered that psychological query—would you sooner be a greater fool than you are, or a greater fool than you look?—it will continue to worry us and cause us almost to wish that we were not, and never had been. In our school days we always awaited a flippant response to the psychological query, "Which would you sooner be—a greater fool than you are, or a greater fool than you look?"—was invariably followed by the arch retort, "Impossible for you to be either." And that settled it.

That has all been changed. Messrs. Charles Brookfield and F. C. Philips, the authors of "A Woman's Reason," now at the Empire Theatre, have written three acts in order to prove that the Hon. Nina Keith, daughter of Lord Bletchley, preferred being a greater fool to looking a greater fool than she was, at the beginning of the play. Probably this shows her strength of character. At any rate, it is the problem of our schooldays settled to the satisfaction of Messrs. Brookfield and Philips. If Nina had selected to merely look a greater fool than she was, she would never have skipped away with the white-waistcoated Captain Crozier, just because Algie was littering her drawing-room with his blocks, and because Auntie Leah stood up for the boy and hinted that he was neglected.

In the good old days—come to think of it, they really must have been good old days—audiences needed some better excuse than this for a woman's infidelity. Playwrights went to the eternal sexual question for marital infelicities. Messrs. Brookfield and Philips, however, have probably been told that such subjects are unpleasant, so they flew to the box of blocks and made poor Algie and Auntie Leah responsible for Mrs. D'Acosta's little housekeeping arrangement with Captain Crozier. They failed to convince the patrons of the Empire Theatre of the logic of their ideas, but at any rate they made the attempt.

"A Woman's Reason" is so utterly and absolutely without rhyme or reason, justification or excuse, that you find the pessimistic query, "What next?" staring you in the face. The only redeeming features of the play are its dialogue, which is occasionally witty, and some of its amusing cynicism, which is clever. The funny clergyman went a long way with the audience, which had just rejected the serious and dignified minister of "Michael and His Lost Angel." The Rev. Cosmo Pretious caused a good deal of laughter because he turned the pet subjects of the ministry into ridicule. He was insistently mirth-provoking. If he had charitably attempted to remove the tragic box of blocks from Mrs. D'Acosta's drawing-room, or had faithfully endeavored to prevent the blue silk elopement, we should have found him a contemptible nuisance. As it was, we enjoyed him. Had he danced a jig, or sung a comic song, he would have been even more successful.

In the last act Messrs. Brookfield and Phillips have sought to evoke meretricious discussion by giving Nina back to her divorced husband after she had already lived with Captain Crozier. This is probably the new morality. The old morality consisted in killing off the sinful woman as in "Frou-Frou," and "La Dame aux Camelias," and thus avoiding the futurities. The original name of "A Woman's Reason" was "A Woman with a Future." Both titles are equally stupid. I would suggest as a much better name for this rubbish, "She Would Be a Fool; or, How a Box of Blocks Broke Up an Appy One."

Why is it that some patent medicine isn't invented for the bloodless heroine of the plays of to-day? There is a fortune in the tonic that will restore her lost vitalities. She is simply rampaging in our midst. You see her in her worst form in "The Benefit of the Doubt," and you get her ad nauseam, in all her immoral morality, in "The Squire of Dames." She is even beginning to creep into novels. In his latest problem book, "Jude the Obscure," Thomas Hardy introduces us to a lady who gets married, and declines to live with her husband because he is personally disagreeable to her, and then runs off with a lover, with whom she also declines to live because he isn't personally disagreeable to her.

These caprices are pardonable in men, unpardonable in women, although some people affect to believe in the vice-versaness of this. I have heard of a man who left his wife because she kept too many cats and dogs. I can respect him for it. Divorces based on the outrage of man's digestive apparatus occur every day; they are quite comprehensible. But for women to encroach upon these masculine prerogatives is sheer and undiluted folly. Plays dealing with such idiocies can never hope to live.

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"A Woman's Reason" succeeded in bringing Miss Viola Allen to grief. This delightful actress has never yet played any part so badly as she played Nina Keith. She was dreadfully loud, and when she made her first entrance togged up in the garbs of the Queen's drawing-room, she was guilty of the vulgarity of deliberately taking the centre of the stage to show off her clothes. She might have been the star of a third-rate organization catering to an audience at Red Bank, N. J. Miss Allen's emotion was forced and ludicrously unreal, and her usual reposeful manner was absolutely absent. Of course, it is possible that she realized the supreme inanity of the role she was called upon to portray, but even that is scarcely an excuse for her.

May Robson was exquisitely funny as the turfy daughter of the Rev. Cosmo Pretious. Miss Robson, I understand, hated her part, because she was obliged to look pretty, instead of posing as the character fright, in which she has made her reputation. Miss Robson is an oddity, and she merits discussion. She is perhaps the only actress on the stage to-day—the only pretty actress, I mean—who takes a delight in making herself hideous for the entertainment of the crowds. She was much happier in the second act of "A Woman's Reason," when she was supposed to be seven years older and could consequently make up as an old maid, than in the first act. I am rather glad that she played the part, because she showed the public how charming she really is, and they will therefore appreciate her all the more when they see her in one of her beloved eccentric roles. Miss Robson owns that sublime gift—a sense of the ridiculous. It is a gift that makes life worth living—one that is a constant fund of selfish and unselfish entertainment. Her second-act idea of Agatha Pretious was so ineffably droll that it positively helped the play. I can't believe that Miss Maude Millett, in London, did nearly as much with the part.

Henry Miller, as the somewhat blithering D'Acosta, was quite harmless, and Edgar Davenport as Captain Crozier just escaped harsh criticism. J. E. Dodson and Elsie de Wolfe were both acceptable. Miss De Wolfe is certainly surprising me. She must wear seven-leagued boots, for she has marched to the front so rapidly. In her impassioned scene with Nina she captured her audience most unmistakably, and her merit was unconsciously increased by the demerit of Miss Allen. Miss Genevieve Reynolds showed us Sarah Jane's idea of a lady of title. She was hopelessly out of the May Fair picture.

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At Daly's Theatre, "The Countess Gucki" is a charming little bit of negative enjoyment. It sets forth no problem. It doesn't even ask you if you would sooner be a greater fool than you are, or look a greater fool than you. It is old-fashioned and pretty, and it contains a good deal of genuine comedy. I like it better than any of the German adaptations I have seen at Daly's Theatre in the last two years.

Von Schonthan, the author, simply shows you the fascinating Gucki trying to resist the audacious Bruno von Neuhoff, and finally succumbing to his ardent wooing. Although it would have seemed a trifle more appropriate for Miss Rehan to have settled down to matrimony with the old Russian General Suvatscheff than with the very juvenile Von Neuhoff, still we must be thankful for small mercies at Mr. Daly's hands nowadays.

Miss Rehan did not impersonate a hoyden; nor did she tackle the baby act of which she is so unreasonably fond. She played the part of a twenty-six-year-old siren, and she played it in her own inimitable manner. There are not two Ada Rehans on the American stage. Give this actress a part that suits her to a reasonable extent, and you will see acting that would hypnotize a stone. Poor Miss Rehan did herself, or allowed Mr. Daly to do her, a serious injury when she appeared as the skittish chicken-bride in "The Transit of Leo," but with a few more such parts as that of the Countess Gucki all will be forgotten and forgiven. She was entirely responsible for the favor accorded to Von Schonthan's play, which is of such slight texture as to be scarcely a play at all.

This actress appears to better advantage in "costume" than in modern dress, but the gowns she wore in the "Countess Gucki" might have been improved upon. And that headgear. Venus herself would have looked odious with it. It resembled a malignant tumor tied up with bandages. Now there are wigs and wigs. There are also wigmakers and wigmakers; and I should advise Miss Rehan to pay a little more attention to her tresses. No actress can afford to disregard personal appearance. It is a great charm-enhancer. Why doesn't Miss Rehan take a few lessons from Miss Maxine Elliott?

Charles Richman must surely be congratulated. He was just beginning to pose as an actor nipped in the bud—a sort of blighted rose. He was going to England to see what he could do there, and to learn how to wear evening dress as though he dined in it every night, when Daly snapped him up. Richman has never done anything better than this role of Von Neuhoff, and for the first time since John Drew left Daly's I didn't miss his footstep on the stair. Other people said the same thing, and, under the circumstances, I think that we should all slap this young actor affectionately on the back and beg him to remember us at our best.

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The highly Bostonese manager, Eugene Tompkins gave us "Burmah," which started in last Tuesday night to tear into tatters the emotions of the patrons of the American Theatre. The first thing that strikes you about "Burmah" is that it is big; the second that it is meant to be big; and the third that if it were not big it would be nothing at all. It is a Drury lane melodrama, evolved by the late Henry Pettitt and the unlate Sirgusarris. It is a melodrama of the same stamp as "The Sporting Duchess," but I like it better, because any story that it tells is told simply. It is not much use "guying" this sort of play with its impossible villains, its chestnutty heroes and its colorless, lackadaisical heroines, who wouldn't be happy if they could, until the curtain has fallen upon the fifth act. It is time lost, for melodrama is apparently a necessity, the champagne at Desmond O'Brien if it were not for the noteworthy picture of the London Empire, in which the scene occurs. Mr. Tompkins's scenery lures you away from smiles at Henry Pettitt and Sir Gus, and they probably intended that it should.

I should like to know which of the speeches in "Burmah" the titled knight wrote, for there were no very disastrous grammatical errors. My own idea is that Henry Pettitt wrote "Burmah," and that Sirgusarris type-wrote it.

Miss Henrietta Crosman has been away from us for a long time, and it was pleasant to welcome her back. She certainly made Norah Hanlan a reality, and, as I said last Thursday, her work was epoch-making inasmuch as she showed that lost virtue need not invariably be suggested by a black dress. Miss Crosman made a distinct hit. H. Cooper Cliffe earned the hisses of the audience, and got them, as he passed before the curtain in the good old-fashioned way. Miss Minnie Dupree, who appears to have divested herself of the lisp that the role of Susan in "Held by the Enemy" left with her, proved to be just as entertaining without it, and Max Figman played a dude very satisfactorily.

Nobody need be ashamed to appreciate "Burmah." It even possesses the problem element, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if the question of the discarded black dress came up for discussion.

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Julia Marlowe, who has acquired a new importance, thanks to Sarah's unsolicited commendation of this charming little woman, plays in Brooklyn next week, and her agent sends me the following criticism of her work from a New Orleans paper. It is good enough to quote, because it shows that all the Willie Winters are not in New York: "Limpid mountain brooks that dance in the sunshine down their pebbly beds, banks of wild flowers begemmed with vernal raindrops, the winds that shake the topmost tassels of the swaying pines on the mountain crests, are none of them brighter, sweeter, fresher, or more absolutely free and unconstrained than is Julia Marlowe."

That seems to me positively delightful, and admirably fitted to lure the inhabitants of the city of trolley cars to the Montauk Theatre. Any actress who suggests limpid mountain brooks that do skirt dances in the sunshine upon their pebbly beds—which are much nicer things than folding beds—will be welcome to Brooklyn.

I am also informed that in an interview Miss Marlowe remarked: "I cannot say that I ever really lose myself in my part. I am always conscious that I am Mrs. Taber." That, too, is nice to know, because it shows that husbands on the stage really have something to do with the case, tra-la. I wonder if Sarah Bernhardt is always conscious that she is Mme. Damala; if Rose Coghlan is perpetually Mrs. John T. Sullivan, and if Fanny Davenport, even in "Gismonda," never loses sight of the fact that she is Mrs. Melbourne McDowell. This consciousness of marital title must be rather discouraging at times. It must be difficult for Lillian Russell, singling an arduous role, to remember whether she is Mrs. Braham, Mrs. Teddy Solomon, or Signora Giovanni Perugini. No wonder that Bettina Girard has gone over to the vaudeville stage, for how could she be expected to play a legitimate role when she is trying to realize whether she is Mrs. Padelford, Mrs. Raffael, or Mrs. Harrison J. Wolfe? It is all very well to think affectionately of your hubby when he is the only one, but so many of the ladies of the stage believe in the charm of variety that I don't see how they can possibly allow Miss Julia Marlowe's statement to pass without comment.

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Sarah has decided to do "Izeyl" for the first two days of the new week. "Camille," "Adrienne Lecouvreur" and "Fedora" were less acceptable than the Buddhist novelty, which packed Abbey's Theatre for six meaty nights and a matinee. Wednesday night she will revive "La Tosca," the play in which she has met with her greatest American success, and on Friday night we shall see her for the first time in Ludermann's problem play, "Magda."

Modjeska introduced us to "Magda" in January, 1894, and, while it interested us, it did not startle us. Bernhardt's sensationalism, however, will add a charm to the play, and it will be like seeing something brand-new. The story of the drama is simplicity itself. Magda is a quaint girl, who has lived quietly in her father's house, as free from any sort of sin as a monkey up a tree. That is the pleasing way in which she puts it. Her father wanted her to marry Dr. Weber, and rather than submit to this she fled from her home. She went upon the stage, but before doing this she met Privy Counsellor Von Keller, who betrayed and then deserted her.

She grew famous, of course, and when she met Von Keller later, "face to face"—as the fond stage phrase goes—she thanked him for her betrayal, saying: "You introduced me to the gamut of sensations—love, hate, revenge, distress, starvation, ambition and maternal affection. Having experienced those sensations, I became famous. I thank you."

Those are the main points of "Magda," and, naturally, they attracted Sarah, who will not impersonate respectable women destitute of pasts. Bernhardt made a great sensation in the part in London, and she will probably duplicate her success here. At any rate, "Magda" will be distinctly worth seeing.

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Yvette has gone from us with a barrel full of dollars and a heart full of love for dear America and the sweet Americans. She loves everybody, from Teddy Marks to Oscar Hammerstein, and she harbors no resentment against Sarah Bernhardt, Melba, Calve, Nordica, or the De Reszkes. Such upstarts are naturally enough beneath Yvette's notice. She can afford to be magnanimous, and there are even indications that she will return to our palpitant bosoms.

Yvette certainly made many friends. Hers is not a very complicated entity, although she likes us to believe in the eccentricity of her genius and the waywardness of her art. She is a hard-working money earner, with an eye to business—both eyes to business, in fact. If she had three eyes, there would be three eyes to business. Mlle. Guilbert, however, must prepare herself for a little less attention if she visits us again. The novelty has worn off her work, and the imitators have sprung up like mushrooms, and will continue to spring up. Yvette, however, will always be a useful woman, and while there are institutions in this city like Keith's, and Proctor's, and Tony Pastor's, and Koster & Bial's, there will always be room for her here.

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The passing of Mlle. Jane May from the austere regions bounded by Daly's Theatre to the lightsome frivolity and tobacco-fuming comfort of Hammerstein's Olympia is an odd occurrence. It is not unparalleled, however. It was Mr. Daly who imported Cissy Loftus with her nice young husband, Justin Huntly McCarthy. He was going to do wonders with her, and both New York and London gaped in awe at the prospect. All Mr. Daly did was to permit Cissy to display her imitative gifts in Koster & Bial's concert hall, where she impersonated Ada Rehan and others. It will thus be seen that the step from the sublime to the ridiculous is just as insignificant as it has ever been, and that from Daly's Theatre to the 'alls is not such a very remarkable distance.

When Mr. Daly opens his season in London, next September, I hope that he will carry in his pockets credentials as the authorized agent of Hammerstein, Koster & Bial, Keith, Proctor and Tony Pastor. Cissy Loftus was a three months' success, and Mlle. Jane May, who appears to-morrow night at Olympia, will surely prove to be a drawing card. Mr. Daly knows a good thing when he sees it, and even if he cannot utilize an artist for his own Rehan-bounded stage, there are others—other stages—and Daly is not an egotist.

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Wilson Barrett appears to have captured London with "The Sign of the Cross," which he produced in this country last year, without offering it to New York. Mr. Barrett was afraid of New York, and ill luck had pursued him for so long that he was a trifle timorous about experiments. "The Sign of the Cross' was scarcely heard of in this country until it reached London. There it is as big a success as "Trilby" or "The Prisoner of Zenda." Barrett's stock will boom again, and Americans will feel an interest in him once more. He has been a wanderer upon the face of the earth for many years. I am glad to hear of his success again, not because he is an interesting actor—to me he has always appeared singularly artificial and stagey—but because he is a conscientious worker, a man of persistent industry, and sincerely interested in the theatre. Barrett had reached a point in this city when he was scarcely able to draw a corporal's guard to the popular-price houses. Now he has fitted himself once more for Abbey's Theatre.

And yet there are a few fanatics who declare that in independent New York a London reputation is of little avail. It means everything—in the "legitimate," in comic opera, in grand opera, and in vaudeville. Look at Loie Fuller. A few years ago she was serpentining in "Quack, M. D.," at the Columbus Theatre, Harlem. Nobody went to see her without uttering a protest. And now Koster & Bial have engaged her at a few thousand dollars a week, just because London reversed the New York decision.

ALAN DALE.

Musical and Dramatic Notes.

Joseffy's first reappearance in New York will be at the next concert of the New York Symphony Society.

Manager Louis Roble, of Miner's Eighth Avenue Theatre, will be given a benefit Sunday evening, February 16, at the Eighth Avenue Theatre.

Bettina Girard has changed her mind about going on the vaudeville stage. She was to have appeared at Proctor's, but instead will go with Weber and Fields in their new farce comedy, "A Trolley Party."

"The War of Wealth," a new melodrama, by Charles T. Dazey, will be produced at the Star Theatre February 10. The cast will include Lawrence Hanley, Joseph Wheelock, A. S. Lipman, Fanny McIntyre, Belle Bucklin and Laura Booth.

A concert for the benefit of St. Christopher's Home will be given in Mendelssohn Glee Club Hall next Thursday evening. Among those who have volunteered their services are Charlotte Walker, Marion Walker, Ruth Thompson, Sig. Victor Clodio, Grant Odell and Bessie Strauss.

Dorothy Usner, who plays the part of Buttons in "Gentleman Joe," is the daughter of E. D. Usner, treasurer and auditor of the Toledo, Peoria & Western Railroad. She adopted the stage against the wishes of her family. Three times they induced her to return to her home, but as often she left. She has a small part which calls for little acting, but is ambitious. Her family is prominent socially in the West.

The Ice Palace Skating Rink, Lexington Avenue and One Hundred and Seventh street, has a number of entertainments scheduled, which will appeal to the skater, athlete and spectator at the same time. Matches are being made for racing, polo and hockey games with foreign clubs, and the national amateur fancy figure skating contest are to be held at the rink, which will prove interesting and instructive. Entries to compete are from New York, Boston, Montreal, Quebec and other cities. Not a small feature is the music by Bayne's Sixty-ninth Regiment Band.

La Loie Fuller will conclude her engagement which she is now fulfilling at the Municipal Casino, Nice, the coming week, and will immediately afterward sail for this city, arriving here on or about February 14, and opening the following Monday, February 17, at Koster & Bial's Music Hall. The electrical and mechanical experts employed by La Loie during her extended engagement at the Comedie Parisian and the Palace Theatre, London, where she introduced her marvellous fire dances, which have been the sensation of continental Europe during the last ten months, will precede Miss Fuller to this country by about a week and will tear up the entire stage of Koster & Bial's and rebuild it so that it may be adapted to Miss Fuller's requirements.

John L. Stoddard, the lecturer, is about to return to Daly's Theatre for his annual Lenten matinee season. His new series will consist of five lectures, four of which, those on Naples and Pompeii, Constantinople, India and Japan, offer exceptional pleasure to the traveller of the imagination, while Mr. Stoddard's entirely new lecture on Napoleon will give fresh treatment to an ever marvellous subject. These lectures will take place during a season of five consecutive weeks in Lent, beginning February 24. Each lecture will in turn occupy one week, so that holders of course tickets will attend the lectures during the same corresponding day of each week till the series is concluded. The lectures of Tuesday and Friday will begin at 3 p. m., and the others at 11 a. m. The sale of course tickets will open on Thursday, February 13.

Charles J. Richman, the latest addition to Mr. Daly's stock company, and who made such a hit in "The Countess Gucki," has played various roles for many years, but not until he appeared with Mr. Daly was his real worth discovered. He was born in Chicago twenty-six years ago, and there studied law. It was not to his liking, however, and being an amateur actor of ability, he determined to take to the stage. His first appearance in this city was in the leading part of "Major Wellington Fleming" at the Fifth Avenue. Later he was engaged in A. M. Palmer's stock company, and last Fall succeeded Maurice Barrymore as leading man of the Stockwell stock company of San Francisco. He was engaged as leading man by Mrs. Langtry for her American tour, which she decided not to make. Then he signed with Miss Cayvan, but her ill health caused the abandonment of the tour.

Messrs. Primrose and West are making extensive preparations for the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of their career as partners and performers. The affair takes place at the Madison Square Garden, Monday, March 9, when a unique and novel programme will be presented. Between three and five hundred men and women are to take part in the performance, which is to be of gigantic proportions. They have already received a basketful of letters and telegrams of congratulation. There are one hundred and thirty-seven boxes in the Garden, but owing to the great demand for them many more will have to be built expressly for this event. Well-known managers are coming from all parts of the country. Among those who are to occupy boxes are Augustus Pitou, E. G. Gilmore, Tony Pastor, F. F. Proctor, Al Hayman, Eugene Tompkins of Boston; W. J. Gilmore, Philadelphia; W. H. Rapley, Washington; Charles E. Ford, Baltimore; Peter McCourt, Denver; H. E. Day, Utica; C. H. Smith, Albany; Wagner & Reis, Syracuse; John D. Mishler, Reading; Harry Hamlin, Chicago; Harry Davis, Pittsburg, and many others yet to be heard from. The Garden is to be elaborately decorated for the occasion.